

I finally stopped running from my ghost

—"Those words linger around me

So how could I let you?."

William

I woke at eight o'clock to a silence that felt different than usual. For three years, the silence of my apartment had been heavy—the particular quiet of isolation, of days that blurred together, of a man who had stopped expecting anything from the hours that stretched before him. But this morning, the silence felt lighter. Anticipatory. Like the pause before music begins, when the orchestra has raised their instruments and the conductor's baton is poised in the air.

Today was the day.

I lay still for a moment, taking inventory of my body the way Dr. Chaisri had taught me. Heart rate: elevated but not racing. Breathing: shallow but not panicked. Hands: steady, for now. The medication was doing its job, smoothing the sharpest edges of my anxiety into something manageable. Something I could work with.

Eight o'clock. I had time. I got up slowly, moving through the familiar geography of my bedroom with the particular care of someone who has learned not to trust their own body. The floor was cool beneath my feet. The air smelled faintly of the lavender diffuser Lego had brought me weeks ago, still working its quiet magic in the corner.

Today, I would step into the world.

Today, strangers would look at my grief rendered in oil and canvas and judge whether it was worth their time, their money, their attention.

Today, Est would be there with his camera, documenting everything.

I pressed my palms against my eyes and breathed.

You are here. You are present. You are alive.

The words had become automatic now—a mantra worn smooth from repetition. But this morning, they felt different. Not desperate. Not pleading. Just... true. I was here. I was present. I was, against all odds, still alive.

And in approximately eight hours, I would give a speech in front of hundreds of people about the worst three years of my life.

The thought should have sent me spiraling. Six months ago, it would have. Six months ago, I would have spent this morning cataloging all the ways the day could go wrong, all the exits I might need, all the excuses I could use to cancel at the last

moment. But something had shifted. Not dramatically—I wasn't cured, wasn't suddenly confident, wasn't magically transformed into someone who didn't check locks three times or flinch at unexpected sounds. But the weight of today felt different. Manageable. Like something I could carry instead of something that would crush me.

The bathroom mirror showed me the face I was still learning to recognize—the one that looked slightly less haunted than it had six months ago, slightly more present. My hair was neat now, thanks to Lego's careful work yesterday. The dark circles under my eyes had faded to shadows instead of bruises. I looked like someone who might be able to survive the day ahead.

I brushed my teeth. Washed my face. The routines of normalcy that had once felt impossible, now just felt like routines.

I went to my studio. The room was empty of finished work—all my paintings had been transported to the gallery weeks ago, hung on walls I'd walked past during my trial run. But my notebooks were still here, stacked on the desk where I'd left them, and my supplies were arranged in the careful order that helped my mind stay calm.

I sat down and opened a fresh page.

The sketch came without planning—the way the best ones always did. My hand moved across the paper, charcoal lines appearing like they'd been waiting to exist, and slowly a shape emerged. A figure. Small and bright, even rendered in blacks and grays. Hair pulled up, head tilted, caught mid-laugh at something I couldn't see.

Lego.

I'd drawn him thousands of times over the years—he'd been my first real model, back when we were teenagers and I was just starting to take art seriously. But this sketch felt different. Lighter. More honest. I wasn't drawing the version of Lego I'd needed to survive my isolation. I was drawing the person he actually was: complicated and resilient, carrying his own shadows while still managing to be someone else's light.

The sketch took almost an hour. When I finished, I sat back and looked at it.

Thank you, I thought. For staying. For not giving up on me.

I added it to the notebook with a date in the corner. Evidence of this morning, this day, this moment of calm before everything changed.

My personal notebook lay open, pages filled with drawings that would never leave this room. Private things. Vulnerable things. The visual diary of a mind learning to be gentle with itself.

I picked up a pencil and began to draw. It wasn't anything planned—just shapes emerging from the page, following some impulse I couldn't name. A face took form. Eyes that I knew without meaning to draw them. The particular curve of a jaw I'd studied through camera sessions and stolen glances and one kiss that still haunted my sleep.

Est.

I'd painted his hands holding a rose. I'd created his portrait in charcoal and gray, half-finished, titled with the only words I could manage. I'd filled notebooks with studies of his eyes, his fingers, the way light fell across his cheekbones when he was concentrating on a shot. Evidence of obsession. Evidence of longing. Evidence that even when I was pushing him away, I was paying attention.

Tonight, he would be there. Camera raised. Professional distance in place. Documenting my return to the world with the same careful attention he'd brought to everything.

And I still had no idea what to say to him.

I set down the pencil and looked at what I'd drawn. Est's profile, caught in the moment before he raised his camera. The particular concentration in his expression. The way his lips parted slightly when he was thinking.

I'd memorized him without meaning to. Had cataloged every detail during our sessions together, storing them away like evidence of something precious. And now all that attention was hanging in a gallery, waiting to be judged by strangers who didn't know what any of it meant.

The shower was my next ritual. I stood under the water for a long time, letting the heat work its way into muscles that had been tense for weeks. The steam filled the small space, creating a cocoon of warmth and white noise that muffled the anxiety trying to build in my chest.

My eyes fell on a small jar on the shower shelf—bath salts that Lego had given me months ago, still sealed. The label was hand-written in his careful script: Lavender & chamomile. For bad days. Or good ones.

I'd never opened them. The gesture had felt too intimate somehow, too much like accepting care I didn't deserve. But today—today was the day I'd been working toward for months. Today deserved something different.

I opened the jar.

The scent hit me immediately—lavender and something softer underneath, herbal and green. I poured some into my palm and watched the crystals dissolve under the

spray, turning the water slightly milky, filling the steam with fragrance.

It was such a small thing. Such a simple act of self-care. But standing there, breathing in the scent Lego had chosen for me, I felt something crack open in my chest. Not painfully—more like a door that had been stuck finally swinging free.

I let myself cry. Just for a moment. The water washed the tears away before they could settle, and no one was there to see.

When I finally stepped out, I felt cleaner than I had in years. Not just physically—something deeper. Like I'd washed away a layer of the person I'd been, making room for whoever I was becoming.

I dried off and dressed in the clothes I'd laid out for the morning: a dark blue tracksuit, soft and comfortable, the kind of thing I'd wear on any ordinary day. The suit could wait. The armor could wait. For now, I wanted to feel like myself.

The hours between nine and ten passed slowly. I made coffee—black with sugar, the way I always took it—and sat at my kitchen counter, watching the light shift across the floor. The apartment was quiet around me, but it was a different kind of quiet now. Not the silence of hiding. The silence of waiting.

I thought about Est. I'd been thinking about Est constantly for weeks—for months, really, since long before I'd sent him the painting of his hands. But today, the thoughts felt sharper. More immediate. Because today, I would see him.

He would be at the gallery. Camera raised. Professional and distant. Documenting my return to the world, capturing my vulnerability for the permanent record. And I would have to exist in his presence without falling apart.

I didn't know if I could do it.

The painting I'd sent him—his hands cradling a rose, rendered in soft grays—was in his apartment now. I'd wrapped it myself, written a letter that had taken seventeen drafts, sent it with my heart in my throat and my hands shaking so badly I'd had to sit down afterward.

I wondered what he'd done with the painting. Whether he'd hung it somewhere—his living room, maybe, or his bedroom, or the corner where the morning light fell best. Whether he looked at it and thought of me. Whether he understood what I'd been trying to say.

I see you, the painting had meant. Even at my worst, I was paying attention. Even when I was drowning, you were something gentle I could hold onto. But I didn't know if he'd understood. Didn't know if any of it had reached him.

The anxiety tried to spiral, but I caught it before it could take hold. I went through the grounding exercises Dr. Chaisri had taught me: five things I could see, four things I could touch, three things I could hear. The coffee cup warm in my hands. The sunlight on the floor. The distant sound of traffic, muffled by glass.

You are here. You are present. You are alive.

And in a few hours, Est would be too.

Lego arrived at exactly ten o'clock. I heard the knock—his particular rhythm, three quick raps followed by two slower ones—and felt something in my chest ease immediately. He was here. I wasn't alone.

When I opened the door, he was standing in the hallway with a large canvas bag over one shoulder, wearing a soft green sweater that made him look younger. His hair was down today and there was color on his cheeks, the kind that came from walking fast in the Bangkok heat.

"Good morning, P'Will!" His voice was bright, carrying the particular energy he brought to everything. "I come bearing breakfast and emotional support."

"Come in," I said, stepping aside to let him pass. "You didn't have to bring food."

"I wanted to." He set the bag on my kitchen counter and began unpacking it with efficient movements. "I made muffins. Blueberry and lemon, your favorites."

I watched him move through my kitchen like it was his own—opening cabinets, finding plates, arranging things with the particular care he brought to everything. This was what he'd been doing for years, I realized. Taking care of me. Making sure I ate. Making sure I had something beyond the silence.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, not looking at me as he worked. Giving me space to answer honestly.

"Anxious," I admitted. "But... okay, I think. The medication is helping."

"Good." He finally turned, holding up a muffin like a trophy. "Eat this. Then we'll talk about the schedule."

We settled onto the sofa with our breakfast—coffee for both of us, though our preferences couldn't have been more different. Mine was black with a single spoon of sugar, dark and bitter the way I'd always taken it. Lego's had so much almond milk in it that the coffee nearly disappeared, turning the liquid a pale caramel color that matched his aesthetic.

"I can't believe you call that coffee." I said, watching him take a sip.

"I can't believe you call that drinkable." He wrinkled his nose at my cup. "It looks like engine oil."

"It keeps me alive."

"Barely."

We ate in comfortable silence for a while. The muffins were excellent—Lego had always been a good cook, one of the many things he'd learned from my mother during all those afternoons in her kitchen. The thought of her made my chest ache, but not as sharply as it once had. The grief was still there, would probably always be there, but it had learned to coexist with other things. With gratitude. With love. With the particular warmth of sitting on a sofa with my oldest friend, eating breakfast like normal people.

"Tell me about Tui," I said, wanting to shift the focus away from myself for a moment. "How are things?"

Lego's whole face changed—a softness entering his expression that I'd never seen before. Not the bright, performative happiness he often wore, but something quieter. Deeper.

"Things are good," he said, and the simple words carried more weight than they should have. "Really good, P'Will. He's... he doesn't try to fix me. You know? He just—lets me be who I am. Even when I'm tired or sad or not performing. He just lets me exist, and that's enough."

"I'm glad." I meant it. "You deserve someone who sees you like that."

"So do you."

I looked away, focusing on my coffee cup. The ceramic was warm against my palms, grounding me in the present moment.

"P'Will." Lego's voice was gentle. "Are you thinking about Est?"

"I'm always thinking about Est." The admission came out before I could stop it—raw and honest in a way I rarely allowed myself to be. Lego didn't react with surprise; he just nodded, like he'd been expecting exactly this.

"You'll see him tonight," he said. "At the gallery."

"I know."

"And that's terrifying."

"Yes."

"But also—" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Maybe it's also something else? Not just terrifying?"

I thought about it. About the way my heart raced when I thought of seeing Est, about the particular quality of the anxiety that twisted in my stomach. It wasn't just fear. There was something else underneath—something that felt almost like hope.

"I don't know, Whether there's a chance. Whether I've ruined everything too completely."

"There's only one way to find out."

"What if I can't handle the answer?"

Lego set down his cup and turned to face me fully, his expression serious in a way it rarely was.

"P'Will. Listen to me." His voice was firm. "Whatever happens tonight—whatever Est says or doesn't say, whatever the answer is—you're still going to be okay. Not immediately. Not easily. But okay. Because you've done the work. You've changed. And you have people who love you regardless of what happens with one person."

I wrapped my hands around the mug, letting the warmth ground me. The familiar weight of it, the particular chip in the rim that my thumb always found. Small things. Anchors to the present moment.

"I'm still scared about the speech," I admitted. "And the crowds. And—"

"Est?"

I didn't answer. Didn't need to.

Lego's expression softened. "I know. I know you are. But you've prepared for this. You've done everything right. And whatever happens with P'Est—whatever he says or doesn't say, however he reacts—you're still going to be okay. You have people who love you. You have a support system. You have strategies and backup plans and an agent who will literally create a diversion if you give her the signal."

"That sounds dramatic when you say it out loud."

"It's not dramatic. It's prepared. There's a difference." He reached across the island to squeeze my hand briefly. "Now eat a muffin. You need energy for your triumphant return to the art world."

"When did you become so wise?"

"I've always been wise. You just weren't paying attention."

We spent the morning on my sofa—the same sofa where I'd spent countless hours during my worst days, wrapped in blankets and trying not to exist. But today felt different. Today, Lego was beside me, his knee brace visible beneath his comfortable clothes, talking about everything and nothing while the morning light shifted through my windows.

He told me about Tui. About the relationship that had finally become official, the particular happiness that came from being loved properly instead of just loved desperately. His face changed when he talked about Tui—something softening behind his eyes, a warmth that seemed to come from somewhere deep.

"He sees me," Lego said, not looking at me, staring instead at the Bangkok skyline beyond my windows. "Not the version of me that's always cheerful, always helping, always fine. The real version. The one who's scared sometimes. The one who needs things."

"That's what you deserve."

"I didn't know that before." His voice was quiet. "I thought I had to earn it. Keep being useful, keep being happy, keep being the sunshine so people would want to keep me around. But Tui—" He shook his head, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Tui just wants me. Even the parts that aren't sunshine."

I thought about that. About the difference between being loved for what you provided and being loved for who you were. About the versions of myself I'd shown the world versus the reality I'd been hiding.

Tonight, that reality would be on display. Every dark painting, every chaos piece, every raw confession rendered in oil and canvas. The world would see what I'd been through—not the curated version, but the truth.

He smiled, and I found myself smiling back despite everything. This was what Lego did—he lightened things without dismissing them, found the space for humor even in serious conversations.

"Now," he said, standing up and collecting our empty plates, "let me clean up, and then I need to go get ready. We're meeting at my place for lunch, remember? One o'clock."

"I remember."

"Good. I'm making curry. And then I'm doing your hair and makeup, and I don't want to hear any complaints about it."

"I wasn't going to complain."



"You were going to complain internally. I could see it in your face."

He was right. I had been.

"Fine," I said. "No complaints. Internal or otherwise."

"That's better." He headed toward my kitchen, then paused at the doorway, looking back at me. "You're going to be amazing tonight, P'Will. The world is finally going to see what I've always seen."

Before I could respond, he'd disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me alone with the warmth of his words settling into my chest.

The hours between Lego's departure and my own felt infinite. I moved through the apartment slowly, going through the checklist I'd made with Dr. Chaisri's help. Medication taken. Emergency supplies packed into the small bag Lego had helped me assemble yesterday. Phone charged. Index cards with my speech tucked into my jacket pocket.

The suit hung in my closet—dark, tailored, the kind of thing I might have worn to gallery openings before everything fell apart. I'd bought it specifically for tonight, an investment in the person I was trying to become. But looking at it now, I couldn't bring myself to put it on yet. It felt like armor, and I wasn't ready to need armor.

Instead, I sat at my desk and looked at the letter I'd written for my speech.

The words blurred together, familiar from repetition but still somehow foreign. I'd written seventeen versions before settling on this one—the version that mentioned my mother's garden, that acknowledged the people who stayed, that talked about absence and light as things that could coexist.

I'd written about healing. About the unglamorous work of showing up to therapy sessions and taking medication and trying, again and again, to become someone different than the person who had hidden from the world.

I hadn't written about Est directly. The things I wanted to say to him were too raw, too private, too likely to break me open in ways I couldn't afford on a night when I needed to seem functional. But he would hear the speech. He would stand in that gallery, camera raised, and listen to me talk about "people who saw me before I could see myself."

Would he know I meant him?

At twelve-thirty, I finally put on the suit.

The fabric felt strange against my skin—formal and structured in ways my usual

clothes weren't. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw someone unfamiliar: a man in elegant clothes, standing straight, looking almost like the artist the world remembered.

Almost.

There were still shadows in my eyes. Still a tension in my shoulders that wouldn't quite ease. But I looked better than I had in years. I looked like someone who might survive the night ahead.

I gathered my things: the emergency bag, my phone, my index cards. The small photograph of my mother that I'd tucked into an inner pocket, where I could reach it if I needed to remember why I was doing this.

I stood in my living room, dressed for the first public appearance of my adult life, and looked around at the apartment that had been my entire world for three years. The furniture I knew intimately. The windows I'd stared through for thousands of hours. The particular silence that had become my constant companion.

I was leaving this place.

Not forever. Not permanently. I would come back tonight, after everything was over, and sleep in my own bed and wake up tomorrow in the same familiar space. But something felt different about this departure. Like I was crossing a threshold I couldn't uncross.

Then I stood at my front door and stared at the handle.

This was the moment. The threshold. The dragon to be slain.

For three years, I'd barely left this apartment. The few times I had—therapy appointments, trial runs to the gallery—I'd been accompanied by someone, usually Lego, and I'd returned home as quickly as possible, retreating to my sanctuary before the outside world could swallow me whole. But today was different. Today, I was going out into the world properly. Today, I was going to stand in a gallery full of strangers and let them examine my grief. Today, I was going to give a speech about my mental health journey in front of people who had paid money to hear me talk.

Today, I was going to see Est.

My hand trembled as I reached for the doorknob.

You are here, I reminded myself. You are present. You are alive.

I opened the door.

The hallway was just a hallway. That was the strange part. I'd imagined it as

something else—a threshold, a test, a dragon to be slain. But it was just carpet and doors and the distant sound of a neighbor's television. The same hallway I'd walked through thousands of times before, unchanged by my three years of absence.

The elevator felt different, though. The small space pressed against me, the walls too close, the fluorescent lights too bright. I counted my breaths as the floors ticked down: in for four, hold for four, out for four. The numbers helped. The rhythm helped.

When the doors opened onto the lobby, I stepped out into a space I barely recognized. The lobby of my building had always been elegant—marble floors, fresh flowers on the reception desk, the kind of understated luxury that came with expensive real estate. But I'd forgotten how large it was. How many people moved through it on an ordinary afternoon. The security guard glanced up as I passed, offering a polite nod, and I wondered if he remembered me. Wondered if he'd noticed my absence.

The car was waiting outside—a black sedan, anonymous and professional. My manager, was in the passenger seat, her tablet already open to the evening's schedule.

"Good afternoon, William." Her voice was calm, measured—the particular tone she used when managing anxious artists. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrified," I admitted. "But functional."

"That's all we need." She smiled. "Let me go over the timeline one more time."

I slid into the back seat, and the driver pulled away from the curb. Bangkok traffic enveloped us immediately—the particular chaos of the city, horns and engines and the endless movement of a metropolis that never stopped.

I tried not to look out the window. The sensory input was too much: too many colors, too many people, too much life happening in every direction. Instead, I focused on My manager's voice as she walked me through the schedule.

"We'll arrive at Khun Lego's apartment shortly. Lunch there until two-thirty. Then we pick you both up at two-forty and head to the gallery. You'll arrive at three for final preparations—walking through the space, meeting the staff, reviewing any last-minute changes. The doors open to guests at four. You'll mingle until five-thirty, and then we have you scheduled for your speech at six. After that, it's open gallery until ten-thirty. Closing remarks, photographs with key donors, and then we get you home."

Seven and a half hours. That's how long I would have to survive.

"Any questions?" she asked.

"What if I can't do it?" The words came out before I could stop them. "What if I get there and I just—can't?"

My manager turned to look at me, her expression softening. "Then we use the signals," she said simply. "Hand on your chest, and I create a distraction. You retreat to the back office. We give you whatever time you need."

"What if I need to leave entirely?"

"Then we leave entirely, and we handle the fallout later. Your wellbeing comes first, William. Everything else is logistics."

I nodded, trying to let the words settle into the part of me that was still spiraling.

The driver turned onto a familiar street, and I realized we were approaching Lego's building. I'd never been inside—in all the years of our friendship, Lego had always come to me. I hadn't thought about how strange that was until now.

"Ready?" My manager asked.

"No," I said honestly. "But I'm going anyway."

The world hadn't stopped because I'd stopped participating in it. Somehow, that was both comforting and devastating.

Lego's apartment was on the fourth floor of a building that looked nothing like mine. Where my tower was all glass and steel, his building was older—warm brick, plants trailing from balconies, the kind of lived-in aesthetic that suggested community rather than isolation.

I climbed the stairs—and found his door by the number. I'd seen the address dozens of times on delivery labels, had imagined what the space might look like, but I'd never actually been here. Apartment 404. I knocked.

The door flew open almost immediately, and I was greeted by Lego's beaming face and something even more unexpected: the largest collection of stuffed animals I had ever seen outside of a toy store.

"P'Will! You're here! You're actually here!" He grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, practically bouncing with excitement. "Welcome to my humble home—sorry about the mess"

I stepped over the threshold and stopped, staring. The apartment was small—probably a quarter the size of my penthouse—but every inch of it was alive with color and softness and personality. Stuffed animals covered the sofa, spilled across the floor, lined the windowsills in cheerful clusters. The walls were painted a soft

lavender, decorated with posters and photographs and what looked like hand-painted signs with inspirational quotes. The whole space smelled like baked goods and flowers and the particular sweetness of someone who refused to let the world make them hard.

"It's a lot," Lego said, watching my face. "I know it's a lot. But these are my—" He paused, searching for the word. "—my armor? My fortress against the things that try to make me sad. I surround myself with soft things so the sharp things can't get in."

Something in my chest cracked. I'd known, intellectually, that Lego carried his own pain. That his bright smiles and endless energy weren't the whole story. But standing here, surrounded by his collection of soft defenses, I understood it in a different way. We were the same, he and I. We'd just built different kinds of walls.

"I love it," I said, and I meant it. "It's very you."

Lego's face lit up. "Really? You don't think it's too much? Tui says I have a hoarding problem but I call it a comfort investment strategy—"

"It's exactly you." I looked around again, taking in the details. A row of tiny ceramic animals on a shelf. A string of lights shaped like stars. A photograph of what must have been Lego as a child, all huge eyes and missing teeth and the same bright smile. "I should have come here sooner."

His smile widened impossibly further. "Come in, come in. Food first, then makeup. We have a schedule to keep."

The vegetable curry and meat were excellent—Lego had always been a good cook—but I barely tasted them. My appetite had disappeared somewhere between my apartment and here, replaced by a nervous energy that made it hard to sit still. But I ate anyway, because Lego was watching, because my therapist had reminded me that anxiety was worse on an empty stomach, because I was trying to take care of myself even when care felt impossible.

"Tell me about the speech," Lego said around a mouthful of rice. "Have you practiced it this morning?"

"Dozens of times."

"And?"

"And I still can't get the ending right." I set down my fork, anxiety flickering at the edges. "It feels—incomplete. Like there's something I haven't figured out how to say."

"Maybe you'll figure it out when you're standing there. Sometimes the right words

only come when you really need them."

"That sounds terrifying."

"It is. But you're good at terrifying now." Lego smiled. "You've been practicing."

Across the table, Lego was a vision. He'd transformed while I was traveling to his apartment—gone from soft sweater and loose hair to something that took my breath away. His dark hair was pulled up into an elegant bun, with wisps escaping to frame his face and his bangs curled softly against his forehead. His makeup was flawless: subtle enough to look natural, dramatic enough to draw attention to his beautiful eyes.

And the suit. I'd never seen Lego in formal wear before. He'd always been soft colors and flowing fabrics, romantic and whimsical and young. But the person sitting across from me now was something else entirely. The two-piece suit was perfectly tailored black, sharp and sophisticated, but the shirt underneath was sheer—a concession to his personality, the particular Lego-ness that couldn't be completely suppressed. Through the delicate fabric, I could see the barest suggestion of his skin, his collarbone, the chain of a necklace I didn't recognize.

And his heels. God, his heels. They were far too high for someone who was supposed to be resting a damaged knee, and I could see the knee brace visible beneath his trousers, but he wore them with the confidence of someone who had never considered a more sensible option.

"You look incredible." I said.

Lego preened. "I know. I wanted to match my best friend's big night."

Looking at him, I suddenly felt less ridiculous in my own suit. Less like I was wearing costume. If Lego could show up looking like this—elegant and bold and entirely himself—then maybe my own formal wear wasn't armor after all. Maybe it was just another version of who I was allowed to be.

"Now," Lego said, pushing back from the table, "finish your food while I set up. You're getting the full treatment."

"I really don't need—"

"You need." His voice was firm. "Trust me, P'Will. A little makeup will help you feel more confident. More complete. More courageous."

I opened my mouth to argue, but something in his expression stopped me. He wasn't doing this for himself. He was doing this for me. Because he knew that facing the world was hard, and he wanted to give me every possible tool.

"Okay," I said. "No complaints. Remember?"

He beamed. "See? You're already learning."

After lunch, Lego led me to his small bathroom—barely big enough for both of us, but he made it work. He sat me down on a stool and spread his supplies across the counter: brushes and palettes and products I couldn't identify. Hair products and skin care and a collection of nail polish bottles in every color imaginable. The particular intimacy of seeing someone's private space, the things they didn't show to the world.

"First, the toothbrush," he said, handing me a new one still in its package. "Fresh breath is essential for public speaking."

I brushed my teeth while he laid out his plans, explaining each product like a general preparing for battle. Foundation to even my skin tone. Concealer to hide the shadows under my eyes. Powder to keep everything in place under the gallery lights. Something for my eyebrows. Something for my lashes. Something to add "definition" to my cheekbones. By the time I spit out the toothpaste, I was overwhelmed by information I didn't understand.

"Just sit still," Lego said, picking up the first brush. "I'll do all the work. You just have to not move."

The process took longer than I expected. Lego worked slowly, carefully, pausing frequently to assess his progress. His touch was gentle—feather-light strokes against my skin, the soft press of his fingers as he blended something across my cheekbones. I closed my eyes and let myself drift, focusing on the sensation rather than the anxiety building in my chest.

"You know," Lego said quietly as he worked, "I used to do this for the other models. Before shoots. Help them with their makeup, make sure everyone looked their best."

"I didn't know that."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, P'Will." His voice was gentle, not accusatory. "We spent years with me taking care of you, but you didn't always see what I was doing outside of that. My jobs. My dancing. My life."

Guilt settled into my stomach like a stone. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just—notice, now. That's all I ask." He picked up another brush. "I'm not just sunshine, you know. I have storms too. I just choose to keep them private, most of the time."

"Why?"

"Because you needed light." He paused, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "And because... I was afraid. That if I showed you my darkness, you wouldn't need me anymore. That I'd just be another person with problems, instead of the person who helped you with yours."

The honesty of the admission made my throat tight. "I'd never—"

"I know. I know that now." He smiled, but it was softer than his usual brightness. "Tui helped me see it. That I'm allowed to be whole—both the light and the dark. That people can love me even when I'm not performing."

"I do love you," I said. "All of you. Not just the sunshine."

"I know." He picked up a final brush. "Now hold still. I'm doing your lips."

When Lego finally turned the mirror toward me, I barely recognized myself. The face looking back was still mine—same bone structure, same features—but somehow elevated. More polished. The shadows under my eyes were gone. My cheekbones looked sharper. My eyes seemed brighter, framed by lashes that were somehow more defined.

I looked like someone who could stand in front of a crowd and speak. Someone who could face the world without hiding.

"What do you think?" Lego asked, watching my reaction.

"I think..." I trailed off, studying the stranger in the mirror. "I think I look like an artist."

"You are an artist. This just makes it visible."

I looked at him—really looked, seeing past the makeup and the suit to the person underneath. The nineteen-year-old who had been bringing me flowers every Wednesday for three years. The friend who had refused to give up on me even when I'd given him every reason to walk away.

"Thank you," I said. "Not just for this. For everything. For staying."

"Always, P'Will." He squeezed my shoulder. "Now come on. We have an exhibition to get to."

The car arrived at exactly 2:40. Lego and I walked out of his building together, his hand tucked into the crook of my elbow in a gesture that looked casual but was actually steadying. The driver held the door for us, and we slid into the back seat while My manager ran through one final check of the schedule.



"You both look wonderful," she said, and I could tell she meant it. "William, the suit is perfect. And Lego—that shirt is a statement."

"Thank you," Lego said, sliding into the back seat with the careful movements of someone whose heels were slightly too high. "I'm going for 'sophisticated chaos.'"

"You've achieved it."

I settled in beside him, my emergency bag on my lap, my heart already beginning to race. My manager twisted in her seat to face us.

"Twenty minutes to the gallery," she said. "You'll have time to walk the space before guests arrive."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

Bangkok traffic flowed around us—the endless river of cars and motorcycles and tuk-tuks that made the city feel alive. I watched it through the window, trying to ground myself in the present moment. The sky was gray with pollution, but there were patches of blue breaking through. The afternoon light was soft, forgiving.

You are here, I reminded myself. You are present. You are alive.

Beside me, Lego's knee bounced with nervous energy—the kind of restless movement that suggested he was anxious too, even if he'd never admit it. I reached over and rested my hand on his leg, stilling the bounce.

"It's going to be okay." I said.

He looked at me, surprised. "That's my line."

"I thought I'd try it."

"How does it feel?"

I considered the question. "Terrifying. But also... possible."

He covered my hand with his. "That's all it needs to be."

"Quick review of the schedule. We arrive at 3:00. You'll have an hour before the doors open to walk through the space, adjust to the environment, do any last-minute preparations. Opening is at 4:00—VIP collectors first, then general admission at 4:30. The speech is at 6:00. After that, you mingle, you accept congratulations, you survive until 10:30 when we close the doors."

"And if I need to leave?"

"The signal is hand on chest. I'll see it, and I'll create a distraction. But William—" She paused, her expression gentle. "You've done the work. You've prepared for this."

I really believe you can do it."

"What if I can't?"

"Then we figure that out together. But let's see what happens before we plan for failure."

We rode the rest of the way in silence, our hands linked on the seat between us. Two people who had survived impossible things, heading toward something that might actually be a beginning.

The city passed by outside the windows—the familiar landmarks I hadn't seen in years, the streets I'd walked as a child, the particular chaos of life continuing without me. I watched it all like a movie, detached and present at the same time, trying to remember how to exist in spaces I couldn't control.

Real people. Real event. No more practice.

"We're here," My manager said, unnecessarily. "Take a moment if you need it."

I sat in the car, staring at the building that contained three years of my grief. Through the windows, I could see the white walls, the dramatic lighting, the shapes of my paintings hanging in careful sequence.

My mother's portrait was in there somewhere. The chaos pieces. The half-finished portrait of Est titled with the only apology I could manage.

All of it waiting for me.

The gallery was larger than I remembered. I'd been here, walking through empty rooms with My manager and the curator, trying to familiarize myself with the space before it was filled with people. But that visit had felt like a dream—muted and distant, my medication blurring the edges of everything. This was different. This was real.

The white walls stretched upward, impossibly tall, punctuated by my paintings hung in careful sequence. The lighting was dramatic—spots and floods positioned to draw the eye, to make each piece glow from within. The air smelled like fresh paint and floor polish, with an undertone of the flowers that had been arranged in strategic corners.

I stood in the entrance and stared.

Absence & Light was spelled out on the far wall in letters taller than I was—bold and stark, a declaration I couldn't take back. Below it hung the centerpiece: my mother's portrait, rendered in oils that had taken me three months to complete. She was

surrounded by flowers—sunflowers and roses and hydrangeas and dozens of species I'd painted without knowing their names, the garden she'd loved translated into color and light.

She was smiling.

I'd painted that smile from memory, from photographs, from the particular image of her face that I carried with me every moment of every day. It was the last thing I saw before sleep. The first thing I thought of when I woke. And now it was hanging on a gallery wall, about to be seen by strangers.

"Beautiful," Lego breathed beside me. "P'Will, it's beautiful."

"She would have been so proud," he said. "To see all of this. To see you here, facing it."

"She would have cried during the speech."

"Definitely. Loudly. And then she would have hugged you and told you she loved you, regardless of what anyone else thought."

I smiled despite myself. "That's exactly what she would have done."

We walked through the gallery slowly, Lego and I, while My manager spoke with the staff and made last-minute arrangements. The paintings hung in chronological order—a visual narrative of my three years of isolation. The earliest works were dark, chaotic, slashes of color that spoke of rage and grief. Then came the flower series, each bloom rendered with obsessive detail. Then the portraits: My mother in light and shadow, and finally—

I'm Sorry.

The unfinished portrait hung in its own alcove, spotlighted and impossible to miss. Est's face looked back at me—half-rendered in charcoal and gray, the color I'd been planning to add never applied. His eyes were the most detailed part, caught mid-expression, carrying something I couldn't name.

I'd left it incomplete on purpose. Because maybe that was the truth of us: something that never quite arrived at color. Something that was still waiting to be finished.

I'm sorry I pushed you away.

I'm sorry I was too afraid to let you stay.

I'm sorry I left you unfinished when you deserved to be seen in full color.

"He's going to see this," Lego said quietly, standing beside me. "Est. He's going to photograph it."

"I know."

"And the title—"

"I know."

We stood in silence, looking at the confession I'd hung on a gallery wall.

"Are you ready?" Lego asked.

"No," I said honestly. "But I'm doing it anyway."

Then my manager appeared, tablet in hand. "The first guests will arrive in forty minutes. I'd recommend taking this time to walk through the rest of the exhibition, get comfortable with the space. The speech podium is set up in the east wing if you want to do a final run-through."

The doors opened at four o'clock. I wasn't ready—would never be ready—but time moved forward whether I wanted it to or not. My manager guided me to a position near the entrance, where I could greet arriving guests while still having access to an exit route if things became too much.

The first person through the door was a woman I didn't recognize—a critic, probably, based on the way she immediately began studying the nearest painting with narrowed eyes. Behind her came others: collectors with expensive watches, journalists with recording devices, curious strangers who had bought tickets to see the "reclusive genius" return to public life.

Within thirty minutes, the gallery was full.

The noise was the hardest part. I'd forgotten how loud people were—the constant murmur of conversation, the click of heels on polished floors, the particular sound of dozens of bodies moving through space. My hearing amplified everything, picking up fragments of conversation from across the room, making it impossible to focus on any single thing.

"—stunning use of color—"

"—heard he hasn't left his apartment in years—"

"—wonder what triggered the return—"

"—look at the detail on those flowers—"

I pressed my hand against my pocket, feeling the index cards with my speech through the fabric. The physical sensation grounded me, reminded me that I had a plan. That I knew what I was going to say.

They were examining my soul and treating it like merchandise.

The thought sent ice through my veins. My hands were shaking. I pressed them against my thighs, hidden beneath the expensive fabric of my suit, and forced myself to breathe.

You knew this would happen. You prepared for this. This is the price of showing the world what you've been through.

Lego appeared at my side, quiet and steady. "You okay?"

"No."

"Want to leave?"

"No."

He didn't push. Just stood beside me, a silent presence, close enough that our shoulders almost touched. The particular comfort of having someone in your corner, someone who wouldn't judge you for struggling.

I was merchandise. A brand. A narrative being sold to the highest bidder.

The thought made my chest tighten. I could feel the panic building—the familiar pressure behind my ribs, the way my breathing wanted to go shallow and fast. My hands were definitely shaking now. I pressed them harder against my thighs and counted.

One, two, three, four.

Hold.

One, two, three, four.

Release.

"You're doing great," Lego murmured from beside me. He'd positioned himself at my elbow like a protective shadow, ready to intervene if needed. "Just breathe."

I breathed. Smiled at the faces that turned toward me. Shook hands. Said "thank you" to compliments I couldn't quite hear over the roaring in my ears.

Lego's voice was low, meant only for me. "You're doing amazing. You're here. You showed up. That's already a victory."

"It doesn't feel like a victory."

"It never does. But it is."

I focused on my breathing. Counted the seconds. Let the familiar rhythm ground me

in my body, in the present moment, in the reality that I was surviving this even if it didn't feel survivable.

The crowd continued to grow. Voices filled the space—conversations about art and technique and "what the artist was trying to say." I heard fragments of discussion about my mother's portrait, about the chaos pieces, about the particular progression of the exhibition from darkness to something like hope.

And then I saw him.

Est was on the far side of the gallery, camera raised, photographing a cluster of guests admiring one of my chaos pieces. He looked—god, he looked incredible. Professional and focused, moving through the crowd with the particular efficiency I remembered from our sessions. His camera was an extension of his arm, rising and falling with practiced ease, capturing moments I couldn't see from where I stood.

He looked healthy.

He was wearing something simple—dark clothes, nothing flashy—but he carried himself differently than I remembered. More confident. More present. Like he'd grown into himself during the months we'd been apart.

He had healed without me.

I'd missed it. I'd been so focused on my own healing that I hadn't considered what his might look like. He was okay. He was really, genuinely okay.

My whole body went still. Everything else—the noise, the people, the overwhelming pressure of being seen—faded into background static. The only thing that existed was Est, thirty feet away, doing his job with the kind of quiet competence that had first made me notice him.

I'd spent a month thinking about this moment. Imagining what it would be like to see him again. Rehearsing things I might say, conversations we might have. But now that he was here—actually here, real and present and close enough to touch if I crossed the room—I couldn't remember any of it. My mind went blank except for one overwhelming thought:

I love him.

Still. Despite everything. Despite the months of distance, the silence I'd inflicted, the way I'd pushed him away. I loved him.

As if sensing my attention, Est lowered his camera and looked up.

Our eyes met across the crowded gallery.

For a moment, neither of us moved. The world contracted to just the two of us,

suspended in the space between connection and distance. I could see him processing—his expression shifting through surprise, then guardedness, then something more complicated.

Then he raised his camera and photographed someone else, and the moment was over.

He's working. He's being professional. This isn't about you.

But I couldn't stop watching. Every movement he made, every photo he took, every moment of his presence in a space that was filled with my grief—I cataloged it all. The particular way he held his camera. The concentration in his expression. The professional efficiency that I remembered from our sessions, before everything had fallen apart.

He was beautiful. He'd always been beautiful. But there was something different now—a steadiness that hadn't been there before, a groundedness that made me realize how much he'd changed.

I couldn't focus after that. The next hour passed in fragments—conversations I couldn't track, hands I shook without feeling, compliments that slid past me like water. All I could see was Est, moving through the gallery, documenting everything, not looking at me.

Was he avoiding me? Had he felt the same charge I'd felt when our eyes met, or had I imagined it?

Did he look at I'm Sorry yet? What did he think?

The questions spiraled, and I let them. There was no point in fighting. My brain had made its choice: Est was the only thing that mattered, and everything else was background noise.

"William." My manager's voice cut through my thoughts. "It's almost time for your speech."

I looked at the clock. 5:45. Fifteen minutes.

"I need—" My voice came out rough. "I need a moment. Before."

"Of course. There's a quiet room in the back. I'll come get you at 5:55."

She guided me through the crowd, shielding me from attention with her body, until we reached a small office behind the main gallery. The door closed, and suddenly I was alone.

The silence was a relief.

I pressed my back against the wall and slid down until I was sitting on the floor. The position was undignified—a man in an expensive suit sitting on industrial carpet—but I didn't care. I needed to feel contained. Needed the wall against my spine, the floor beneath my legs.

You are here, I reminded myself. You are present. You are alive.

I pulled out the photograph of my mother and looked at it.

"Hi, Mae," I whispered. "I'm about to do something terrifying. But I'm doing it for you. And for—" I swallowed. "And for me."

Her smile looked back at me, frozen in time, unchanged by the years of grief.

"I miss you," I said. "I'm going to talk about you. About the garden. About everything you taught me about light."

The photograph didn't respond. It never did. But looking at it steadied something in my chest, reminded me why I'd done all of this. Why I'd spent three years painting. Why I'd finally agreed to an exhibition. Why I was sitting on the floor of a back office, preparing to speak to strangers about the most vulnerable parts of my life.

She would have wanted this. She would have been so proud.

A knock at the door. "William? It's time."

I stood. Straightened my suit. Put the photograph back in my pocket.

The gallery had a small stage—really just a raised platform with a microphone stand—positioned in front of my mother's portrait. As I walked toward it, the crowd parted, faces turning toward me with expectation. The lights were blinding, making it impossible to pick out individual features, reducing the audience to a blur of color and movement.

I found Lego in the front row. He was standing with his hand pressed over his heart—our signal, the one that usually meant I needed extraction. But he'd reversed it. He was pressing his hand to his own chest, and the message was clear: I'm with you. My heart is with you.

I stepped up to the microphone.

The sound system crackled, amplifying my nervous breath across the gallery. Somewhere in the crowd, a camera flash went off. Est, probably, documenting this moment. Documenting me.

I pulled out my index cards and looked at the first one.

"Good evening," I said, and my voice came out stronger than I expected. "Thank you for being here."



The standard opening. The words I'd practiced a hundred times in front of my mirror. They created space—gave me a moment to breathe, to ground myself, to remember why I was doing this.

"This exhibition is called Absence & Light," I continued, reading from my cards. "Which sounds poetic, I know. The kind of title that makes critics nod thoughtfully and write about contrast and metaphor." A soft laugh from the crowd. "But the truth is simpler. I called it that because those are the two things I've been living with for the past three years. Absence—of connection, of courage, of my mother. And light—the small, stubborn kind that refuses to go out no matter how dark things get."

I looked up from my cards. The crowd was silent, attentive.

"My mother died three years ago. Some of you know that—it was in the press, covered with the appropriate distance and respect that we give to tragedies that happen to other people. What wasn't in the press was what happened afterward. How I stopped leaving my apartment. How I stopped seeing people, talking to people, being a person. How I retreated into these walls—" I gestured at the paintings surrounding us— "and tried to process something that couldn't be processed."

My voice wavered. I steadied it.

"The paintings you see here are not pretty. They're not meant to be. They're the record of a breakdown—of grief turning into rage, rage turning into obsession, obsession slowly, slowly, turning into something that might eventually become healing."

I found Lego's eyes again. He was crying silently, tears tracking down his cheeks.

"I want to thank my therapist, Dr. Chaisri, by name. That's not something artists usually do. We're supposed to maintain the myth—the idea that genius comes from suffering, that our pain is romantic, that we create in spite of our demons rather than with help managing them. But that's a lie. I'm standing here tonight because someone helped me. Because someone gave me tools when I was too lost to find them myself."

The crowd shifted, murmured. This wasn't the speech they'd expected.

"I want to thank the people who stayed," I continued. "The friend who brought me flowers every Wednesday for three years, even when I couldn't name them, couldn't understand them, couldn't do anything but paint them as evidence of a love I didn't deserve."

I looked at Lego as I said it. His hand pressed harder against his chest.

"And I want to thank—" I paused. This was the part I'd rewritten seventeen times.

The part I still wasn't sure about. "I want to thank the person who saw me before I could see myself. Who showed up with a camera and a kind of attention I didn't know how to receive. I wasn't ready for what they offered. I'm still not sure I am. But the attempt changed me. The reminder that I could be seen—that someone could look at all of this mess and find something worth looking at—that changed everything."

I didn't look for Est. I couldn't. If I saw his face, I would fall apart.

"Absence and light," I said. "The title is about balance. About learning that you can carry grief without being crushed by it. That the empty spaces left by people you love don't have to stay empty forever—they can be filled, not replaced, but transformed. That light can find its way through the cracks."

I set down my index cards. The next part wasn't written—the ending I'd added just yesterday, the words that had come to me in the quiet hours before dawn.

"My mother loved her garden," I said. "She tried to teach me about flowers for years. The names, the care requirements, the language of them. I never learned. I was too distracted, too young, too convinced I had better things to do."

The crowd was silent. I could hear my own heartbeat in the microphone's feedback.

"After she died, I started painting flowers. Obsessively. Hundreds of them. I told myself I was processing grief, working through trauma, doing the things artists do. But the truth is simpler: I was finally paying attention to what she tried to teach me. Finally learning the lessons I'd refused to learn while she was alive."

My voice cracked. I let it.

"The paintings in this exhibition are love letters," I said. "To my mother. To the people who stayed. To the version of myself that might eventually become whole. They're not perfect—nothing I make is perfect—but they're true. And I'm learning that truth matters more than perfection. That being seen in your ugliness is braver than hiding until you're beautiful."

I picked up my cards, signaling the end.

"Thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for looking at these pieces of my grief and finding them worthy of your attention. And thank you—" I had to stop, had to breathe through the tightness in my throat— "thank you for giving me a reason to step back into the light."

I stepped away from the microphone.

The applause started slowly—uncertain, like the audience wasn't sure if it was appropriate—and then built into something louder. I couldn't see through the lights, couldn't identify faces, couldn't do anything but stand there and let the sound wash

over me.

I'd done it. I'd said the words. I'd let them see.

The hours after the speech blurred together. I moved through the gallery in a daze, accepting handshakes and congratulations, posing for photographs, answering questions I couldn't quite hear over the ringing in my ears. My manager stayed close, managing the flow, creating space when I needed it. Lego appeared at regular intervals with water, with snacks, with silent squeezes of my elbow that reminded me I wasn't alone.

And Est. Est was everywhere.

I caught glimpses of him throughout the evening—camera raised, face hidden behind the lens, capturing moments I would probably never see. He photographed the crowd, the paintings, the particular quality of light falling through the gallery windows. He photographed I'm Sorry—I watched him do it, standing in front of my confession for long minutes, taking shot after shot like he was trying to understand something. But he didn't approach me. Didn't try to speak. Just moved through the space like a ghost, documenting everything, touching nothing.

I wanted to go to him. Wanted to cross the gallery and say all the things I'd been too afraid to say for months. But every time I started to move in his direction, someone else appeared—another critic, another collector, another stranger who wanted a piece of my attention.

By nine o'clock, I was exhausted.

"I need air," I told My manager. "Just five minutes."

"There's a balcony," she said. "Through the back hallway. I'll make sure no one follows."

I escaped into the corridor, leaving the noise and lights behind. The hallway was dim, quiet, the particular peace of a space between spaces. I walked until I found the balcony door and stepped outside.

The night air was warm—Bangkok's pollution trapping heat even after sunset—but there was a breeze, and I let it wash over my face. The city spread out below the balcony, lights glittering like scattered stars. I gripped the railing and breathed. The noise from the gallery was muffled here. The lighting was softer.

You did it, I told myself. You survived.

The speech was over. The worst part was done. All I had to do now was make it through another ninety minutes, and then I could go home. Back to my apartment. Back to silence.

Back to being alone.

The thought made my chest ache.

I'd been alone for so long. Had convinced myself it was better that way—safer, easier, less likely to result in the particular devastation that came when people left. But standing here, looking out at a city full of connections I'd cut myself off from, I wasn't sure anymore.

The door opened behind me. I didn't turn around. It was probably Lego, checking on me. Or My manager, reminding me of the schedule. But then a voice said my name, and everything stopped.

"William."

Est was standing in the doorway.

The gallery light behind him turned his figure into a silhouette, obscuring his features, making it impossible to read his expression. His camera hung at his side—not raised, not documenting. Just there.

"Est." My voice came out rough.

"Your manager said you'd be out here." He stepped onto the balcony, letting the door close behind him. Now I could see his face: guarded, careful, carrying something complicated behind his eyes. "I wanted to—I needed to—"

He stopped. Ran a hand through his hair. Started again.

"The speech," he said. "The part about—the person who saw you. Was that—"

"Yes."

The word hung between us. One syllable. A confession.

Est's expression shifted—pain, then something softer, then a kind of resignation I didn't understand.

Was there anything left to wait for?

"William..."

"I know." I turned away from him, gripping the balcony railing so hard my knuckles went white. "I know I'm not ready. I know I pushed you away. I know I don't deserve —"

"Stop."

His voice was firm. I stopped.

"You don't get to decide what I deserve," Est said. "Or what I'm willing to give. That's not how this works."

I didn't know what to say. Didn't know how to navigate a conversation I'd imagined a hundred times and never gotten right.

"I've been in therapy," Est continued. "For months. Working through—everything. The patterns. The reasons I chase people who can't love me back. The reasons I lose myself in other people's chaos instead of building my own stability."

"I know." The words were barely a whisper. "I saw you. At the gallery. You're different. More—present."

"I'm trying."

"So am I."

We stood in silence, the city glittering below us, the noise of the gallery muffled behind the closed door.

"I looked at your painting," Est said finally. "I'm Sorry. I stood in front of it for fifteen minutes."

"I know. I watched you."

"Why did you leave it unfinished?"

The question cut through everything—all my defenses, all my rehearsed explanations. I answered honestly, because I didn't know how to do anything else anymore.

"Because we were unfinished," I said. "Because I didn't know how to complete it. Because—" My voice broke. "Because maybe I wanted to believe that unfinished didn't mean over. That there was still time to add the color."

Est didn't respond immediately. I could hear him breathing—steady and controlled, the particular rhythm of someone who had learned to manage their own anxiety.

"You sent me a painting," he said. "Of my hands."

"Yes."

"I have it in my apartment. Next to my resurrection plant—the one Lego gave me. I look at it every morning."

My heart clenched. "What do you see? When you look at it?"

"I see someone paying attention." His voice was soft. "I see someone who saw me even when they were drowning. I see—" He paused. "I see love. Even if you couldn't say it."

"I loved you." The past tense caught in my throat. "I still—"

"Don't." Est's voice was gentle but firm. "Don't say it yet. You're not ready to mean it the way it needs to be meant. And I'm not ready to receive it."

"Then what do we do?"

The question felt enormous. Bigger than this balcony, this night, this particular moment of standing on the edge of something.

Est stepped closer. Not touching, but close enough that I could feel the warmth of his body, could smell the particular scent of him that I'd never forgotten.

"You're doing it," he said. "You're here. You came out of that tower, and you stood in front of strangers, and you told the truth. That's everything, William. That's the whole thing."

"It doesn't feel like enough."

"It never does." He smiled—a small, complicated smile that carried both sadness and something like hope. "But you did it anyway. And I'm glad I was here to see it."

"What happens now?"

"Now you go back inside. You finish the night. You accept the congratulations and shake the hands and let people see the person you're becoming." He raised his camera, and I understood—this was how he kept distance, how he managed his own overwhelm. "And then you go home. And tomorrow, you wake up and try again."

"And us?"

Est was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was careful.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not—I can't promise anything. I've spent months learning how to not lose myself in other people. Learning that my worth doesn't depend on being loved by someone who can't love me back."

"I can love you." The words came out desperate. "I'm learning. I'm trying—"

"I know you are." He reached out and touched my arm—just briefly, just for a moment. "And I see it. I see the work you're doing. The speech tonight—that was real. The paintings are real. The person you're becoming is real."

"But?"

"But I need to keep being real too. And that means not rushing. Not falling back into patterns that hurt us both." He let his hand drop. "I'm not closing the door, William. I'm just—not walking through it yet."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to make promises, declarations, the kind of grand gestures that had always felt impossible before. But something stopped me. Some new understanding, hard-won through months of therapy, that told me pushing would only push him further away.

"Okay," I said instead. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll keep trying. I'll keep showing up. And I'll wait. However long it takes."

Est studied my face, looking for something. I didn't know if he found it.

"That's all I can ask," he said. Then, softer: "The painting of my hands. I meant it when I said I look at it every morning. It reminds me that—even at your worst, you were paying attention to something gentle. That matters, William. It matters more than you know."

I didn't trust my voice, so I just nodded.

"I should go back," Est said. "I have more documenting to do."

"Will you—" I stopped, unsure what I was asking. "Will you stay? For the rest of the night?"

"I'm contracted until closing." A small smile. "So yes. I'll be here."

"And after?"

"After is after. One thing at a time."

He raised his camera and took a photograph—of me, standing on this balcony, looking at him like he was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"For the record," he said quietly. "You look good tonight. The speech was beautiful. And I'm—I'm proud of you. For all of it."

Then he was gone, slipping back through the door, leaving me alone with the city lights and the taste of hope on my tongue.

The rest of the night passed in a dream. I moved through the gallery, but I was

somewhere else—still on that balcony, still processing the conversation, still feeling the ghost of Est's touch on my arm. People spoke to me and I responded, but I couldn't have told you what anyone said. My body was doing the work; my mind was elsewhere.

I'm not closing the door.

The words played on repeat, a refrain I couldn't stop hearing. Not a yes. Not a promise. But not a no either. Something in between—something that might, eventually, become something more.

I'll keep trying, I'd said. I'll keep showing up.

Was that enough? Could patience and persistence actually become love, or was I fooling myself again? The questions didn't have answers, but they felt different now. Less like panic, more like—planning. Consideration. The particular kind of thinking that looked toward future instead of spiraling into past.

At ten-fifteen, My manager appeared at my elbow.

"Closing remarks in fifteen minutes," she said. "Then photographs with the major donors. Then we can get you home."

"Okay."

"You've done wonderfully, William. The response has been—" She paused, searching for the right word. "Extraordinary. The critics are already writing. The collectors are already bidding. This is going to change everything."

I nodded, but I wasn't thinking about critics or collectors. I was thinking about Est, somewhere in the gallery, still documenting. Still here. Still not closing the door.

The closing remarks were easier than the speech. I thanked everyone for coming, said some appropriate words about art and community, reminded people that the exhibition would be open for three more weeks. The applause was warm. Genuine.

The photographs with donors were more difficult—too many hands to shake, too many faces to remember—but I survived them. Smiled when required. Let My manager guide me through the particular choreography of public life.

And then, finally, it was over.

The gallery was empty when I walked through it one last time. My manager had gone to arrange the car. Lego was waiting by the entrance, patient and quiet. The staff were beginning to clean up, but they gave me space, understanding that I needed a moment alone with my work.



I stopped in front of my mother's portrait.

She smiled down at me, surrounded by flowers, frozen in the particular expression I'd spent three months trying to capture. The warmth in her eyes. The slight tilt of her head. The way she'd looked at me when I was young and struggling and convinced I'd never be good enough.

"I did it, Mae," I whispered. "I came out of the tower. I told the truth. I let them see."

The portrait didn't respond. It never would. But standing here, looking up at her face, I felt something settle in my chest. Not the closure of grief—grief didn't close—but something like peace. Like the particular calm that came from finally doing something you'd been too afraid to do.

"I'm going to keep trying," I said. "With Est. With—everything. I'm going to keep showing up, the way you always wanted me to."

I pressed my hand to my heart—the signal that usually meant I needed extraction. But tonight, it meant something else. Tonight, it was a promise. Then I turned and walked toward the exit, toward Lego's waiting figure, toward the car that would take me home.

The apartment was quiet when I returned. Not the oppressive silence of isolation—the particular quiet of a space at rest. The difference was subtle, but I could feel it. Something had shifted. Something had changed.

I took off my suit jacket and hung it carefully in the closet. Removed my shoes. Went through the familiar rituals of returning home: checking locks, turning off lights, the sequence of actions that had anchored me through three years of hiding. But tonight, the rituals felt different. Not like defense. More like—routine. The simple actions of someone who was tired, who needed rest, who would wake up tomorrow and try again.

I sat on the edge of my bed and pulled out my phone.

There were messages—dozens of them, from people who had been at the gallery, from My manager, from various contacts I barely remembered having. But I scrolled past them all until I found the one I was looking for.

Lego: Home safe. You were incredible tonight. Sleep well, P'Will. Tomorrow is a new day.

I smiled despite myself. Even in text, Lego's particular brightness came through—the sunshine that had kept me alive through the darkest years of my life.

I typed a response: Thank you for staying. For everything.

His reply came almost immediately: Always.

I set down the phone and looked around my bedroom. The same space I'd inhabited for three years. The same ceiling crack. The same view of the city through the windows. But I was different.

Tomorrow, I would wake up and read the reviews. Would answer emails and manage the fallout of having become public again. Would sit with my therapist and process everything that had happened—the speech, the conversation with Est, the particular terror and triumph of being seen.

But tonight, I was allowed to rest.

I lay down and closed my eyes, and for the first time in years, the darkness behind my eyelids didn't feel like an enemy. It felt like possibility—like the space between one chapter and the next, waiting to be filled with whatever came next.

I'm not closing the door.

Est's words echoed in my mind as I drifted toward sleep.

The door wasn't closed. The ending wasn't written. And somewhere, on the other side of the city, Est was going through his own rituals—editing photographs, processing the night, doing the patient work of becoming the person he wanted to be.

We weren't finished. We might never be finished. But maybe that was okay.

Maybe that was the whole point.

I fell asleep thinking about resurrection plants—the ones that could survive years without water, curling in on themselves, appearing dead to anyone who didn't know better. The ones that uncurled when the rain finally came, turning green again, doing the slow and patient work of being alive.

Est was a resurrection plant. And so, I was beginning to understand, was I.

We'd both spent years looking dead. Curled in on ourselves. Waiting for conditions that seemed like they might never come. But tonight, something had shifted. Tonight, it had finally rained.

And tomorrow, maybe, we would both start turning green again.